

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 899

RC 018 674

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TITLE An Empirical Evaluation of a Corporate Outdoor-Based Training Program.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Coalition for Education in the Outdoors Research Symposium (Bradford Woods, IN, April 22-25, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adventure Education; *Attitude Change; Behavior Change; Corporate Education; *Experiential Learning; Outdoor Education; *Program Effectiveness; Training; *Work Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Outdoor-based experiential training (OBET) programs are being used increasingly by U.S. business firms, but intense controversy surrounds their use and there is little empirical evidence concerning their validity. Changes in team building (group) and individual behaviors were assessed among 43 OBET participants who were managers or professional employees of an electrical products manufacturing company. Participants attended a 2.5-day OBET program integrating classroom and experiential activities. About two-thirds of the program was experiential in nature, using both low-ropes and high-ropes activities. The average age of participants was 43 years; 12% were female. Participants and a control group completed a self-report questionnaire immediately prior to training and 4 months after training. Results indicate a significant increase in work group awareness and acceptance of change for participants, but not for the control group. Neither group showed changes in work locus of control, trust in peers, self-esteem at work, or group (task) effectiveness. Management observers felt strongly that those employees who participated in OBET worked together more smoothly after training. (SV)

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AN EMPIRICAL EVALUATION OF A CORPORATE OUTDOOR-BASED
TRAINING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the evaluation of a corporate outdoor training program. Six behaviors were evaluated over a four month period for both the training group and a control group. Significant improvements were reported by the trained group in two behaviors. No significant changes were reported by the control group.

INTRODUCTION

Outdoor-based training programs are being used increasingly by business firms throughout the United States. In a recent survey of Training Directors Wagner, Baldwin & Roland (1991) found that 13% of the organizations surveyed currently use some form of outdoor-based training. Brad Thompson, in Training Magazine (1991) reported that outdoor-based training is a \$100 million industry, and we suspect that this number may be too conservative. Despite the impressive amount of money spent on these programs there is almost no "hard" evidence to justify their use by business. This article presents the findings from a research effort aimed at beginning to fill this void. This purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of an outdoor-based experiential training program on both group and individual behaviors.

In their survey of corporate training directors Wagner, Baldwin & Roland (1991) found that the users of outdoor-based training programs stated that "team-building" was the most common goal of their programs. While team building programs have long been a popular goal of organizational training programs (Buller, 1986), their popularity in corporate training has escalated in recent years for a number of reasons. These reasons include the increasing amount of foreign competition, the growing interdependence of jobs, and the desire of employees for more involvement in their jobs (Varney, 1989).

While team building is the most common use of outdoor-based experiential training (OBET) programs, many professionals have focused on individual changes that an employee experiences after attending an OBET program. Increased willingness to accept change and increased trust in peers are two common goals of OBET programs (Galagan, 1987). Increased self-esteem and an increased ability to accept responsibility for one's actions (locus of control) have also commonly reported benefits of OBET programs (Laabs, 1991).

Not everyone is a believer in the benefits of OBET programs. An intense controversy has surrounded their use by U.S. businesses. On the one hand, anecdotal testaments from participants and their supervisors attest to the effectiveness of OBET as a team building strategy (Liebermann & Ostrow, 1989; Long, 1987), while statements from upper management suggest that OBET surpasses any other form of training in its effectiveness (Focus-Upward Bound, 1989).

On the other hand, skeptics have described OBET programs as "corporate recreation" (Zempke, 1979). Another author suggested that "...building outdoor party games and simulation, when the real work to be done is all around, should be grounds for managerial malpractice indictments..." (Falvey, 1988, p.16). Management consultant Peter Drucker has stated that "somebody will sue and will get the jury to give

him \$5 million damages for psychic pain and that's when employers will learn that this is not within their right" (Focus-Upward Bound, 1989).

Despite the growing use of OBET programs by organizations, and the associated controversy about the value of these programs, there is little conclusive empirical evidence as to the validity of these programs (Thompson, 1991). The current study was an attempt to demonstrate empirically that OBET programs are "real" training, and represent a valuable tool for corporate trainers.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study was conducted over a four month period at a major manufacturer of products for the electrical industry, located in a northern Illinois. The training program was conducted under the direction of the Corporate Training Director, but also used contract facilitators from a nearby University.

The program in the current study is best described as a two and one half day program integrating both classroom and experiential activities. Approximately two-thirds of the program is experiential in nature, and uses both low-ropes and high-ropes activities.

The variables we evaluated included both team building (group) behaviors and individual behaviors. The specific variables are as follows:

Work Locus of Control. A generalized expectancy that the rewards and outcomes of work are controlled by one's own actions (internal), or by other forces not within one's own control (external). Work locus of control was measured using a 16-item scale developed by Spector (1988). The alpha coefficient for work locus of control was .86.

Self-Esteem at Work. Whether one has a positive view on oneself at work (high self-esteem), or a negative view of ones ability to get the job done (low self-esteem). Self-esteem at work was measured using a 4-item scale developed by Quinn & Shepard (1974). The alpha coefficient for self-esteem at work was .85.

Trust in Peers. The extent to which one is willing to assign good intentions to, and have confidence in the words and actions of one's peers. Trust in peers was measured using 6-item scale developed by Cook & Wall (1980). The alpha coefficient for trust in peers was .91.

Group Awareness. The feeling among group members that each member of the work group shows and understanding of group objectives and recognizes the differences in abilities between the individual members of the work group. Group awareness was measured used a 6-item scale from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Seashore, Lawler, Mirvis & Cammann, 1982). The alpha coefficient for this measure was .81.

Group Effectiveness - a measure of the overall functioning of the work group, including level of co-operation, group competence, and task motivation of the members of the work group. Group effectiveness was measured using a 7-item scale, which is part of the Survey of Organizations questionnaire (Taylor & Bowers, 1972). The alpha coefficient for this measure was .95.

Acceptance of change - an employees willingness to look at new ideas and to accept changes in the established way of doing business. Acceptance of change was measured using a 9-item scale developed by the researchers. The alpha coefficient for acceptance of change was .89.

The research design consisted of a pre/post self report questionnaire given to the 43 OBET participants immediately prior to training, and four months after training. We hypothesized that there would be statistically significant improvements in both the group and individual behaviors for the OBET participants, but not for the control group. The participants were all managers or professional employees. Average age of the participants was 43.2, and 12% of the group was female. In addition, a control group was selected of 12 randomly selected managers/ professionals who did not attend this program. The control group was evaluated at the same times as were the participants. Average age of the control group was 45.2, and the group contained two females (16%).

RESULTS

Table 1 compares the means for each of the six behavioral variables before attending the OBET program, and four months after attending the program. All participants completed both the pre and post questionnaires.

TABLE 1

OBET PARTICIPANTS PRE/POST BEHAVIORS
Means/standard deviation/t-tests

MEASURE	BEFORE	AFTER	t	p
Locus of control	2.51 (.703)	2.41 (.700)	0.70	.485
Trust	5.45 (.754)	5.78 (.981)	1.23	.224
Self-esteem	5.58 (1.27)	5.93 (.686)	1.60	.115
Group awareness	5.66 (.674)	6.10 (.663)	3.03	.003**
Group effectiveness	3.77 (.502)	3.94 (.587)	1.40	.165
Acceptance of change	5.50 (.617)	5.90 (.645)	2.86	.005**

N = 43

** p < .01

As table 1 shows, the OBET participants reported significant changes in two of the behaviors: group awareness, and acceptance of change. Thus our hypothesis that there would be a significant improvement in group and individual behaviors was partially supported.

Table 2 compares the means for each of the six behavioral variables for the control group. These measures were taken at the same time as the measures for the OBET participants. All members of the control group completed both the pre and post questionnaires.

TABLE 2

CONTROL GROUP PRE/POST BEHAVIORS
Means/standard deviation/t-tests

<u>MEASURE</u>	<u>BEFORE</u>	<u>AFTER</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>p</u>
Locus of control	2.70 (.549)	2.99 (.580)	1.29	.212
Trust	5.39 (.733)	5.36 (.887)	0.08	.934
Self-esteem	5.48 (1.27)	5.06 (1.04)	0.76	.460
Group awareness	5.24 (.757)	4.97 (1.01)	0.73	.476
Group effectiveness	3.44 (.655)	3.27 (.767)	0.57	.573
Acceptance of change	5.55 (.599)	5.35 (.614)	0.80	.433

N = 12

As table 2 shows, the control group reported no significant changes in any of the six behavioral variables. The hypothesis that there would be no significant changes in control group behaviors was supported.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research program was to evaluate the impact of an outdoor based training program on both group and individual behaviors. The OBET program we evaluated has received positive reviews from the supervisors and administrators in the organization though no empirical data had been gathered prior to this study. The results of the current study suggest that OBET did have a positive effect on two key behaviors; group awareness and acceptance of change. The program did not have a significant effect on group (task) effectiveness, or on trust, self esteem or locus of control. No significant changes in any of the six behaviors were reported by the control group.

Increases in group awareness would suggest that the work teams are able to function more smoothly as a unit, with increased cohesiveness, goal clarity, and homogeneity. Increases in acceptance of change would suggest that people are more willing to accept new ideas, and to try new methods in the work place.

The perceived changes in these measures were consistent with the intuitive observations of the organizational management, but the failure to find any significant changes in self-esteem, work locus of control or trust in peers were not. Management felt strongly that those work employees who participated in OBET worked together more smoothly together after OBET than they did before they attended OBET. Management also felt that OBET participants were better able to deal with changes in the work place after attending OBET. Our research findings supported these observations.

However, while management observers have talked of increases in confidence and other changes in individual behaviors resulting from attendance at an OBET program our research findings did not support these feelings. While our research did not support this observation, given the short duration of the OBET program it may simply be too ambitious to think that an individual's self concept or trust in his/her peers could be dramatically altered by any program of this length.

In addition, the key variable of group effectiveness also showed no significant change after OBET. Since the participants in OBET were all upper level managers, rather than intact work teams, this result was not entirely unexpected. Wagner & Roland (1991) report that training intact work teams maximizes the impact of OBET training on task-related behaviors.

We started this project to answer the question "is OBET effective in changing organizationally desirable behavioral variables?". Our research shows that the answer to this question is "yes", at least in regards to developing a more effective work team, and allowing participants to be more open to change. Because this research project was preliminary in scope, we need to be very cautious in applying these results to other OBET settings. The results are based on a specific programming format. Many other programming formats are possible. Future studies need to look at other program formats to determine if behavioral change patterns similar to those in this study are found.

While much additional research is needed to verify the effectiveness of OBET programs in different settings and using different program models, the results of this study are clear. Outdoor based experiential training is an effective tool in achieving some much needed behavioral changes in U.S. organizations today. While precise programming recommendations await the results of additional studies (a number of which are currently underway) the benefits of a one-day OBET program as a team building tool suggests that OBET will be a valuable and effective training tool for many years to come.

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